

St. John the Baptist an exemplar to Christian Ministers.

A SERMON

PREACHED

IN THE CHAPEL OF TRINITY COLLEGE,

TORONTO,

ON SUNDAY, JUNE 24, 1860.

BY

GEORGE WHITAKER, M.A.,

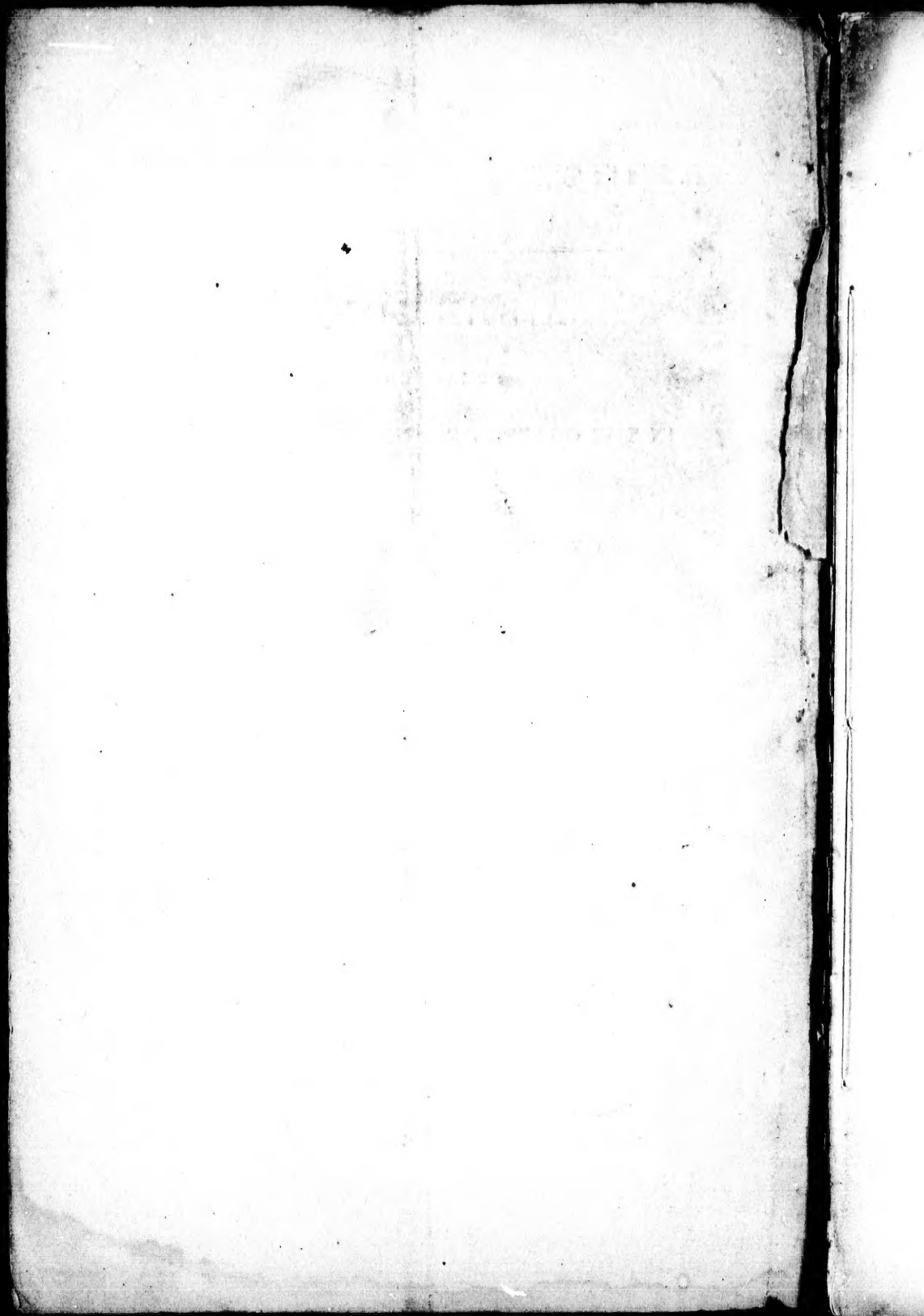
PROVOST OF TRINITY COLLEGE.

PUBLISHED AT THE REQUEST OF THE PROFESSORS AND STUDENTS OF
THE COLLEGE.

TORONTO :

HENRY ROWSELL, KING STREET.

1860.



With the Provost's kind regards,

TPL 5245

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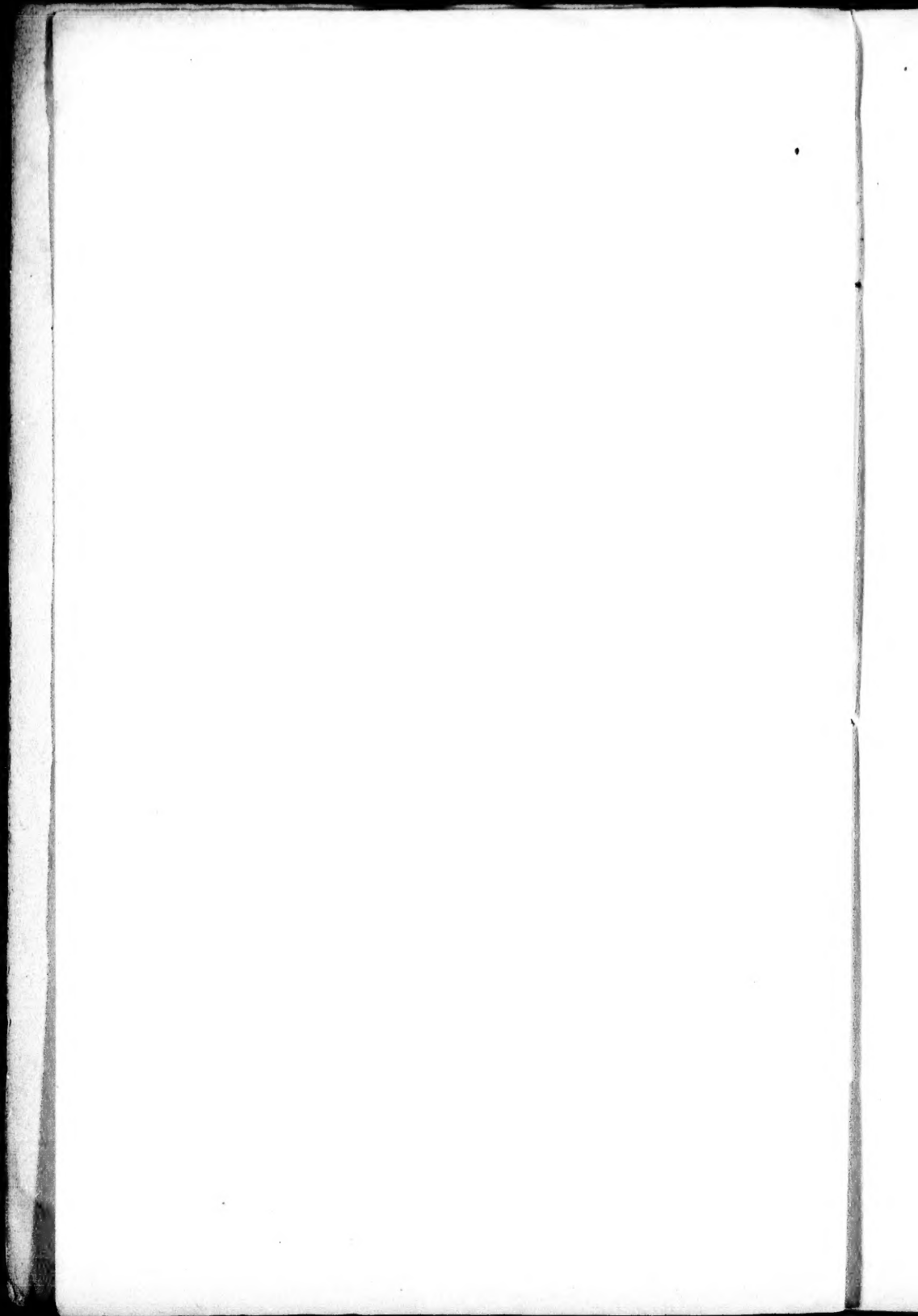
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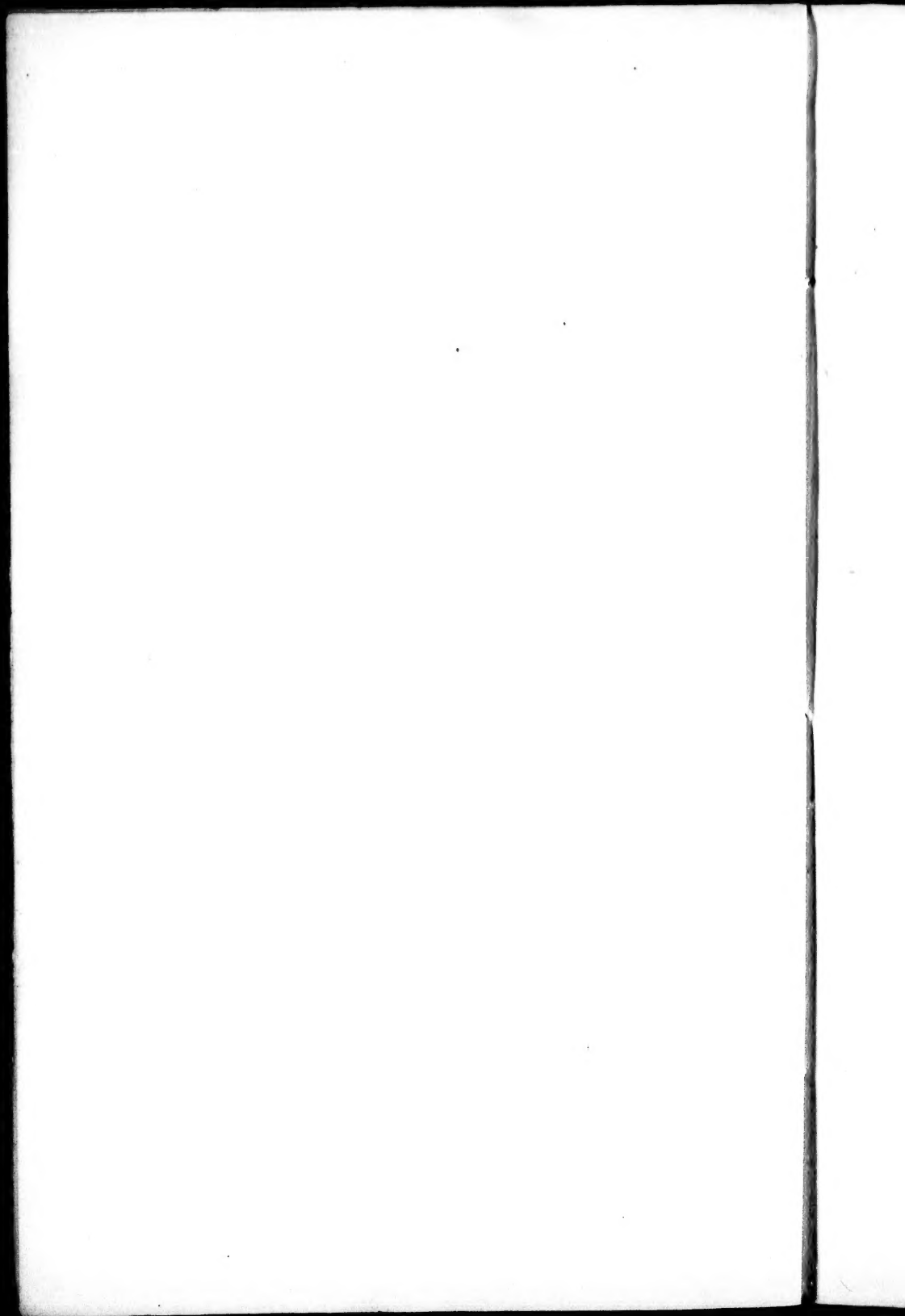
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TO
THE RIGHT REVEREND FATHER IN GOD,
JOHN,
LORD BISHOP OF TORONTO,
IN GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGMENT
OF UNVARYING KINDNESS AND CONFIDENCE
DURING A PERIOD OF NINE YEARS,
AND WITH AN EARNEST PRAYER
FOR THE PERMANENT PROSPERITY AND USEFULNESS
OF A COLLEGE
WHICH OWES ITS FOUNDATION
TO HIS EXERTIONS,
THIS SERMON
IS, BY HIS LORDSHIP'S PERMISSION,
INSCRIBED,
BY HIS OBLIGED AND FAITHFUL SERVANT,
THE AUTHOR.



Isaiah, xl., 3.—THE VOICE OF HIM THAT CRIETH IN THE WILDERNESS, PREPARE YE THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE STRAIGHT IN THE DESERT A HIGHWAY FOR OUR GOD.

The Church instructs us on this day to commemorate the great forerunner of our Lord's first coming; and as, both in the collect for the day, and also in the collect for the third Sunday in Advent, the Baptist is presented to us as a model for our imitation, and more especially as an example to Christian ministers, the thoughts which the day suggests will fully harmonize with our own special circumstances at the close of the academical year, when a larger number than usual are about to take their leave of us for the purpose of entering upon the sacred duties of the ministry. Let us then consider the lessons which may be drawn from the character of that holy man of God, whose memory we are on this day taught to cherish. He stands in a remarkable position between the law and the gospel, yet, surely, far more closely related to the latter than to the former. "All the prophets and the law," says our Lord, "prophe- sied until John," their office was but prophetic; "but from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence." That kingdom had been announced as close at hand, men had been warned and invited to pre- pare for its coming, and, by listening to that warning—by obeying that invitation—they did, by anticipation at least, "press into it." And, surely, we form not only an imper- fect, but an erroneous conception of the character of the Baptist, if we consider that the contrast between his disci- pline and that of our blessed Lord is merely to the prejudice of the former; as if St. John's austerity and severity of tone were but the dark back-ground which should bring out into full relief the meekness and the gentleness of Christ. There was a contrast, indeed, between the forerunner and Him who was to come—between the herald and the Great

King—there was a contrast, yet not an opposition ; wisdom, the wisdom of God, was justified in both her children, in the the child who was called “the prophet of the Highest,” and in the Child whose name is “called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”

We cannot, indeed, hope to apprehend fully the wondrous ways and works of God ; our joy and confidence are that they are far wiser and greater than we can know ; yet we may ever, if we will, discern at least some glimpses of His glory and of His goodness, something which may set our hearts at rest, and enable us to wait in quiet expectation till His mystery shall be finished. May we not, then, believe that the person, the habits, the character of St. John the Baptist were peculiarly suited to the nation to which he was sent ? Old faith was dying out among them ; overlaid, in the instance of the Pharisee, by a mass of senseless and immoral traditions ; all but extirpated, in the instance of the Sadducee, by hardened and profligate infidelity. If any thing could successfully appeal to the conscience of either, it would surely be a re-production before their eyes of ancient simplicity and piety ; we might almost imagine that a Pharisee, hard pressed in argument, would say to an opponent, “If I am wrong, let an old prophet come to be my teacher ;” and that a Sadducee might say, “If I am to believe, it must be at the word of an Elijah.”

And so, on the banks of Jordan, an Elijah stood : a man more fitted to hold converse with Abraham, the friend of God—or with his own great prototype—than with their degenerate descendants of his own time : a man bearing no mark whatever of the days in which he was born ; having no special sympathies with the existing order of things, whether social, political, or religious ; disengaged from all petty ties, from all inferior interests ; a son of Abraham, a true antique Israelite ; speaking, as it were, out of the past to the present, and having nought which bound him to that present but the one common hope of Israel ; announcing, with start-

ling simplicity, that the promise which God had made unto the fathers, He was now fulfilling unto their children.

Some strong reason there must have been why "all men counted John, that he was a prophet indeed," some strong reason why they said, "John did no miracle, but all things that John spake of this man were true;" and I believe that we shall find this reason in the fact that he was instructed to present himself to his countrymen under such a form as carried their minds back irresistibly to the ancient glories of their history, and thus reminded them strongly that God was ever their King—ever ruling over them—even though Babylon or Rome might for a while interpose its gigantic shadow between His people and the glory of His presence.

Nor let us forget that our blessed Lord, while He Himself deigned to present to us a perfect example, and not only that one aspect of holiness which His servant John presented, (for this, let us remember, He did present, when once he fasted for forty days and forty nights, and when, not once, but often, He continued all night in prayer to God,) still fully recognised the type of moral and spiritual excellence, which St. John the Baptist exemplified, as one which was to be realised in His followers. Did His answer to His questioners on this point imply that St. John's rule was wrong, or that His own disciples were as yet incapable of following that rule? New wine was to be put not in old skins, but in new, and the skins were not new as yet. The old garment would not bear the insertion of the stout new cloth, but this would find its place when all things were made new. Nor, again, could the children of the bride-chamber fast while the bridegroom was with them, but the days would come when the bridegroom should be taken from them, and then they should fast.

If we study the example of St. Paul, we may see in beautiful harmony the characteristics both of the forerunner and of our Lord: we may see on the one side the austerity of St. John sublimed into Christian endurance, the obligatory and ceremonial abstinence of the Nazarite transfigured into

the voluntary and moral self-denial which the vow of charity prescribes ; we may see, on the other side, the gracious condescension of our blessed Lord imitated by His apostle, in becoming "all things to all men." And, if we turn to St. Paul's last instructions to his dearly beloved son Timothy, do we not hear an echo of the voice which cried on the banks of the Jordan, in those remarkable words, "Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier."

We may, then, without hesitation, both as Christians and as Christian ministers, seek instruction from the example of St. John the Baptist ; nor can we do better, in seeking that instruction, than to turn to the language of the collect for the day, and observe in what way we are there directed to ask of God that we may follow his example. And first, "by constantly speaking the truth," that is, by steadfastly, and without hesitation, avowing and inculcating sacred verities. This we must do, if we would be useful ministers of the church ; perhaps I should rather say, if we would not be positively dangerous and injurious to others in the exercise of our sacred office. And, if we would constantly—firmly—steadfastly—speak the truth, we must constantly believe it. We are not sent to preach our own opinions, to give utterance to our own fancies, to hazard our own rash conjectures, but to declare the truth of God. What would that voice have been, which cried in the wilderness, had it proceeded from one who was not strongly persuaded of the truth of his great message ? How could the simple recluse have met the gaze of Pharisee and Sadducee, the cold contempt of worldly learning, and the hardened scorn of self-indulgence, had he not felt that he bore God's message to man, and had he not been empowered, by the very depth and earnestness of this conviction, to make the most stubborn and the most indifferent feel it also ?

There is no man to be regarded with deeper pity than

one who has adventured to assume the sacred office which obliges him "constantly to speak the truth," while he has not as yet heartily embraced the truth which he is bound to speak. Brethren, how can we speak that which we do not cordially believe? how can we use words which we accept not in their plain meaning? how can we dare to inculcate, as a holy faith, that which we ourselves regard only as a vague and visionary philosophy?

There is great danger in this regard in our days, and I am bound not to disguise it. We have high examples, which may appear to some to palliate, if not to justify, this grievous offence; we have instances of men who seem to think that creeds and confessions are made only for ignorant and vulgar minds—are merely a gross exoteric husk, which may be utterly condemned by those who have grasped, as they conceive, the inward truth, which this rude and shapeless covering, in their apprehension, at once protects and obscures.

One, ⁽¹⁾ who well knows the state of things at home, speaks, in a recent publication, of "some of our best and noblest minds having made shipwreck concerning the faith," and he adds, that even when this fatal consequence has not been fully realised, there are other cases in which the result has been "either a most timid and uncertain grasp of all revelation, or else the selection of a few scattered portions of it and the rejection (secret or avowed) of all the rest." "That which is saved out of the wreck," he adds, "is too often little more than a Gospel without its Gospel, a creed which reason could have taught without revelation, and which is accepted just because it is reason, and not revelation, which warrants it and vouches for it." These are, indeed, pregnant words, and teach us very forcibly what it is to come short of "constantly speaking the truth."

As members and ministers of the Church of England, we have a plain guide to follow in our Creeds, our Liturgy, and our Articles. I believe that the day will never come when a Christian man will see good cause to be ashamed of the

(1) See note (A) at the end.

confession which we make in those formularies; at all events, no man who is not prepared frankly and cordially to accept them, as the rule and measure of his own teaching, can have any right to intrude himself into the ministry of our branch of the Church. He cannot, in so doing, look for the blessing of Almighty God, for the approval of honest minds, or for the repose of a quiet conscience.

But we are next directed to pray that we may follow the example of St. John the Baptist, "by boldly rebuking vice." And here recent events remind us, in a very startling manner, how soon we may be called upon to follow his example to the very letter. His words, "it is not lawful for thee to have her," have a strange application to the circumstances of the present time, when the lawfulness and expediency of that very connexion, which this servant of God denounced in the case of a degenerate Jew, is publicly and unblushingly advocated by men who claim for themselves the name of Christians. St. John said, ⁽¹⁾ "It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife." Christian legislators are found to say, "It is lawful for thee to have thy sister's husband." Thus are men seeking to infringe the only authoritative marriage law which the world has ever received—to break through the one sacred defence, which the wisdom and benevolence of the Almighty have set around the peace and purity of the domestic circle, elevating thereby unspeakably the moral sense in man, and making his earthly existence incomparably more precious to him than it could otherwise have been, by restraining, by a positive enactment, his absolute freedom in respect of marriage. Let this one great law of God be broken through, and we have no guard whatever against the flood of iniquity; marriage, accounted no longer a holy and honourable thing, will gradually become a thing profane and contemptible, till all distinction between vice and virtue, in this momentous regard, will be utterly obliterated.

Nor can we forget that a step has already been actually

(1) See note (B) at the end.

taken in this perilous course by the introduction of a law of divorce, which offers a miserable facility for the dissolution of the marriage tie, under the plea that it has been unwisely or unhappily contracted; a facility which directly tends to multiply and to aggravate the mischiefs for which it claims to be the remedy.

We cannot look upon these things without entertaining the apprehension that the duty of the ministers of Christ, in the assertion of moral obligations, may in future become far more arduous than it has hitherto been, at least within this realm: that they may have occasion to urge the law of God upon the consciences of men, unsupported by the authority of human law or of public opinion, and to point to the great tribunal, where sin will surely be visited, though neither disgrace nor punishment await its commission here.

We must imitate, then, the boldness of St. John, and let us remember that, if we would be successfully bold against this or any other form of evil, we must possess the boldness of innocence,—a boldness which none can feel but he who knows that it is not a thing impossible to serve God—not a thing impossible to lead a godly, righteous, and sober life; the boldness of him who knows that the love of God is the keeping of His commandments, and that His commandments are not grievous.

But, again, we are directed to pray that, after the example of St. John, we may patiently suffer for the truth's sake. The discharge of the duties already mentioned implies at least the possibility of suffering; men do not always love the truth, so that it will not always be an acceptable office to speak it constantly; men often excuse vice, or desire, at all events, in order to gratify themselves, to relax the restraints imposed by religion and morality, and therefore they who boldly rebuke vice will hardly escape censure and harsh treatment.

It is not, therefore, without some dark forebodings, that we see a great assault preparing, both against the Christian truth which we are bound to speak, and against the Chris-

tian morality which we are bound to uphold ; and we must, if we would do our duty, be prepared to suffer for the truth's sake. And what are we to suffer ? It may be violence from those who openly reject God, both as the revealer of truth, and as the dispenser of moral laws ; or it may be the more dangerous trial of being subjected to the derision of those who affect to understand, far better than ourselves, both Christian doctrine and Christian practice. And so we may have to suffer as bigots, as men hopelessly enthralled to obsolete dogmas, to creeds outworn—as men who derive their rules of social order from the barbarous legislation of an ancient nomad race—a race utterly ignorant of the refinements of modern society, and of the requirements of an advanced civilization. I think that we must expect the sneer rather than the sword, the trial of cruel mockings rather than of bonds and imprisonment.

And, if it be so, let us patiently suffer for the truth's sake. For, beyond all doubt, there is a holy truth for which to suffer, a truth of which Christ Himself is the centre, laying His sacred hand upon both Testaments, upon their doctrine and their discipline—telling us what has been fulfilled for evermore in Him—and what is evermore to be fulfilled in us ; Himself the centre of Patriarchs and Prophets—of Evangelists and Apostles, making every word of theirs His own—their teaching the truth of God ; and still assuring us, as the deceits of the world would bewilder or allure us, that “the world passeth away and the lust thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”

In conclusion, suffer me to remind you that as it is our duty thus to speak the truth, and thus to bear witness against moral evil, in our capacity as ministers of the Christian Church ; so also does this duty devolve upon us in a special manner as members of this College. I trust that those who have gone forth, or are now going forth, from these walls to serve the Church in this Province, feel that at least something has been done, during their period of study here, to prepare them to discharge that service. They have, at all events,

enjoyed the opportunity of becoming conversant with sacred truth ; they have learned how to prove, from holy Scripture, the doctrines which our Church affirms ; they have seen something at least of the marvellous coherence of the articles of our faith one with another ; they have felt, again and again, how complicated is the testimony which God has given to the great verities which are to be the subject of their teaching. Let them think then of the good providence of God, in appointing for them this place of preparation for their arduous duty, and let them ever pray Him to give them grace to turn to good account the advantages which they have here enjoyed.

Nor let any, who are receiving instruction within this college, imagine that their position here does not entail upon them a peculiar responsibility, and lay them under special obligations. The youngest amongst us may remember the circumstances under which this college was founded, and is aware of the end which its founders had in view. More especially do we know the object which the Bishop of this diocese proposed to himself, when, after a long series of discouragements and disappointments, he saw the labour of many years, so far as the direct influence of the Church and the inculcation of religious truth were concerned, utterly thrown away ; and was compelled to begin anew, from the foundation, with greatly diminished resources, the work of his earlier days.

At the close of our ninth year, we have much to be thankful for, in the success of our Bishop's pious endeavours ; but we must also feel that there is room for regret that the success has not been more complete, and that, at all events, steady exertion is required to ensure the permanent prosperity of our society.

Let us, then, remember that this exertion must be made by all, that every one must put his hand to the work. Were our numbers tenfold greater than they are, we might still urge this argument ; but while they are so small, it must apply with tenfold force. Any single instance of neglect of

duty is an appreciable loss to us ; if there be any one among us, whose misconduct throws suspicion on our discipline, or whose indolence suggests disparaging remarks upon our course of study, such misconduct or such indolence is no small damage to the college.

On the other hand, what can be a more cheering incitement to good conduct—to regularity—and to diligence, than the conviction which every one among you may justly entertain, that, by the conscientious discharge of his Christian duty in the place in which God has set him, he is doing very much to build up the general reputation of the society to which he belongs, and to secure results which lie very near the heart of the venerable prelate, who laboured so assiduously for its establishment, and who has ever discovered so constant and solicitous an interest in its welfare.

Give to this college, then, one and all, the help of your earnest efforts and of your constant prayers, both while you are studying here, and when you shall have left us ; and if, unhappily, you have proof that there are those who have evil will at this nursery of the Church, or who speak calumniously of it, be it your care to disappoint, by your own intellectual and moral excellence, the expectations of its adversaries ; and to stop the mouth of calumny, by proving, in your own persons, that within these walls the young are taught to believe the holy doctrines, and to practise the pure morality, of the Gospel of Christ.

NOTES.

NOTE (A), PAGE 9.

The quotations made in the text are taken from Dr. Vaughan's "Memo-rials of Harrow Sundays;" the whole passage is so striking and painfully important, that it is here given in full :—

"I fear it cannot be denied that there is a great and extensive shaking of men's minds at this time as to the truth and authority of the Christian doctrine. We see it with great sorrow. It is indicated in many ways. To think only of our own class of society, it is intimated not obscurely by a great and growing indisposition, on the part of young men otherwise admirably qualified for it, to the profession of a clergyman. How many of those whose character, whose gifts, whose education, and we are sure also (in some cases) whose inclination, destined them for that useful and honourable service, are seen to turn away from it when the time comes! Any thing rather than that; no obscurity, no drudgery, no want of attractiveness and no want of direct usefulness, is enough to deter them from any other calling, so they may escape the necessity of declaring themselves to believe all the articles of the Christian faith, or to assent with all their hearts to the prescribed order of our Church's worship. We do not blame them for this scrupulosity: we can even admire that candour which forbids the concealment of such a hesitation, if it exists. But we deeply lament its existence; we deeply lament its cause. We see how perilous it is to the stability, or at least to the influence, the just and salutary influence, of Christ's Church and of Christ's religion in this country. When once the highest gifts of intellect and of character are refused to the ministry of the Gospel amongst us, the ministry itself will lose much of its real, and all its superficial, influence upon the higher classes of the people of England. The common people may and will, as they always have done in every land and age, hear Christ gladly, even when He speaks to them through the half-educated and the unrefined. But this, though it be a great matter, is far less than might have been or (with many deductions) than is. We want to see the teaching of the true faith powerful with all classes; with the very highest, who perhaps, of all, need it most. And therefore we desire that men of that highest class in every sense, in social position, in intellectual attainments, as well as in purity and nobleness of character, should be found largely sprinkled amongst the very teachers and ministers of our national Church. And the fear that in this coming generation it may not be so, that even in the present generation it is far less so in proportion than once it was, saddens the heart and weakens the hands of many who deeply love the work to which their own lives have been dedicated."

"The immediate cause of this defalcation is that to which the text refers. Some of our best and noblest minds have made shipwreck concerning the faith; they have wrecked themselves on the faith. It is said that there are few, amongst the men of real ability and of high attainment in our great seats of learning, who have not known what it was to doubt more or less seriously, or more or less extensively, or more or less permanently, the truth of what St. Paul here calls the faith. It is of no practical importance to settle the question what proportion the numbers of these may bear to that of those who have not thus doubted. But that there is ground for the apprehension, that there is truth in the statement, none, I fear, can gainsay. And the result too often is, even in cases which end less

than fatally, even in cases, I mean, in which the faith with all its hopes and all its requirements is not finally flung away, either a most timid and uncertain grasp of all revelation, or else the selection of a few scattered portions of it and the rejection (secret or avowed) of all the rest. These, when the general wreck is complete, have contrived to save out of it a few fragments and relics of the ruined vessel, like those *boards and broken pieces of the ship* of which we read in the description of an apostle's shipwreck, on which, amidst waves and storms and under the very darkness of a midnight sky, they seek, as it were, to *escape safe to land*. But, alas! it is a poor hope, in many cases, if the Scriptures say truly that in Christ and in Christ alone is there hope of salvation for fallen man. That which is saved out of the wreck, that on which the chance of escape and safety all depends, is too often little more than a Gospel without its Gospel, a creed which reason could have taught without revelation, and which is accepted just because it is reason and not revelation which warrants it and vouches for it."

NOTE (B), PAGE 10.

An objection may be urged against the assertion in the text, on the ground that Philip was still living, and that St. John rebuked Herod for simple adultery. It has been asserted that Josephus testifies that Philip died in the 20th year of Tiberius, about five years later than St. John's imprisonment. The Philip, however, of whom Josephus speaks, is Philip, tetrarch of Ituræa and Trachonitis (St. Luke, iii. 1,) not Philip, the husband of Herodias. Thus there is no proof that Philip was still living, but there is also no proof that he was dead. What, then, is to determine the nature of the offence with which St. John charged Herod? We must appeal to the language of the Baptist himself. He accused Herod, not of adultery, but of incest. He did not say "It is written, Thou shalt not commit adultery," nor did he say, "It is not lawful for thee to have the wife of another," but, "It is not lawful for thee to have thy *brother's* wife." (St. Mark, vi. 18.) If Philip were dead at the time, (which, for aught we know, he was,) John forbid Herod to maintain his union with the widow of Philip. If Philip were still living, John urged against Herod the sin of incest rather than of adultery, probably because incest was a bar to the lawfulness of the union, which could never be removed; while the bar presented by adultery might be removed by the murder, or by the natural death, of Philip.

At all events, the words of the Baptist, addressed to Herod, unquestionably involve, if Philip were living, the charge of *incestuous* adultery; and though on the death of Philip the connexion would cease to be adulterous, it could not cease to be incestuous. Josephus (Ant., xvii. 15, 1,) tells us that Archelaus, "transgressing the institutions of his ancestors, married Glaphyra, who had been the wife of his brother Alexander, and had borne him children; it being a thing detestable to the Jews to marry their brothers' wives." In this instance there is no uncertainty whatever as to the circumstances under which the union was contracted, as Alexander was put to death by his father Herod the Great; and Archelaus married Glaphyra, after his father's decease, on his return from Rome as Ethnarch of Judæa. That which Josephus, then, so strongly denounced in the instance of Archelaus, St. John would, assuredly, have denounced no less strongly in the instance of his brother Herod.